

Maranatha Baptist Seminary

CHURCH DISCIPLINE: THE PRACTICE OF A LOVING  
CHURCH TAKING SIN SERIOUSLY

A Report

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by

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## CHURCH DISCIPLINE

When many hear the words “church discipline” their minds immediately wander to scenes from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, the Salem Witch Trials, or recent horror stories of church discipline malpractices. In general, most people have a poor understanding, and with that a poor opinion, of church discipline. The result of this misunderstanding has been a decline in church discipline’s existence, which has produced a generation of so called Christians whose mouths occasionally profess Christ but whose lives profess otherwise. As a result of church discipline being marginalized, few church members experience the blessing from God and privilege of church discipline. Therefore, for every believer to reacquaint or acquaint himself for the first time with the doctrine of church discipline is crucial considering its all too common neglect.

This paper is intended to be a thorough work on the issue of church discipline. After a reading of this paper, the hope is to have briefly defined church discipline, discussed the purposes for church discipline, laid out a rather exhaustive biblical model for church discipline, established when discipline is to be administered (the sins which obligate discipline), addressed who ought to be involved in church discipline, and finally, answered various miscellaneous question regarding the topic of church discipline.

### I. What? The Essence of Church Discipline

Before discussing church discipline, it would first be helpful to briefly define church discipline.

#### A. “Discipline”

“Church discipline” is a term composed of two words, “church” and discipline,” both crucial for understanding its essence. “Discipline,” the first word, “in its larger sense, means training, cultivation, improvement, according to prescribed rules; . . . from *disco*, I learn;” and a disciple is “a learner, one under discipline, taught and trained.”<sup>1</sup> Often time, “discipline” carries with it a negative connotation. However, the biblical concept of discipline, as well portrayed in Hebrews 12:3-11, reveals that discipline is beneficial. “Much of discipline is *positive* discipline, or as it is traditionally called, ‘formative discipline.’”<sup>2</sup> Although discipline can often be corrective and reactionary (as most tend to think of it), discipline is also preventative and education.

#### B. “Church”

The second word, “church,” is what sets apart church discipline from discipline in general. So what makes church discipline different from discipline? In the most basic sense, it is discipline practiced by the church for the church. It is accountability, active love, and edification. “Congregational discipline is really an act of discipleship which functions as the corollary of

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<sup>1</sup> Hiscox, Edward T. *Principles and Practices for Baptist Churches* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications), 162.

<sup>2</sup> Dever, Mark. *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 169.

evangelism. Evangelism ministers to those outside the church who are in bondage to sin. Congregational discipline ministers to those within the church who are in bondage to sin.”<sup>3</sup> Further, church discipline (if carried out to expulsion) in many senses is a sub-point to the broader doctrine of separation. And most importantly, church discipline is a blessing from God and a right given to His Church. What a privilege it is to be held accountable and have a congregation caring for one’s spiritual health.

As just noted above, discipline can be divided into two categories: formative and corrective. The category typically associated with church discipline is the corrective side. Yet crucial to the essence of biblical church discipline is that it finds its existence in formative discipline. In other words, church discipline, although often being corrective, should always be formative.

### **C. What church discipline is not**

Finally, to note what *biblical* church discipline is *not* would be beneficial. It is not authoritatively declaring one damned. Nor is it being outdated. It is not *simply* corrective, but also formative. And finally, it is not punitive.

## **II. Why? The Purpose/Reason for Church Discipline**

### **A. Sin**

The foundational reason for church discipline’s existence is sin. “We should all, without hesitation, admit our need for discipline, our need for shaping. None of us are perfect, finished projects.”<sup>4</sup> Without this understanding one will fall into faulty conceptions of church discipline such as the belief that it is unnecessary or even foolish. Without sin, no one would require discipline. Consequently, a good understanding of sin is vital to a good understanding of church discipline.

Administered in a concerned and loving manner, church discipline will help sinning saints face the reality that their sinful actions are inconsistent with their profession of Christian faith. Thus, church discipline is designed to awaken people to their sin and move them to repentance.<sup>5</sup>

Discipline “serves as a deterrent from sin for believers.”<sup>6</sup>

### **B. God commanded it**

The overarching and supreme reason for church discipline is the fact that God commanded it. It is a duty, obligation, imperative, not an option or suggestion. This is not to say churches should be so eager to obey this command that they go on a witch hunt to find faults that do not actually exist. But when the occasion presents itself, discipline is to be administered and not contemplated.<sup>7</sup> Church discipline is not just a teaching, but a mandate.

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<sup>3</sup> Laney, J. Carl. *A Guide to Church Discipline*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1985), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Dever. *Nine Marks*, 169.

<sup>5</sup> Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 14-15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>7</sup> Hiscox. *Principles and Practices*, 170.

### C. The expectations for professing believers

The Bible is clear in that it has expectations for those who profess belief in Christ, and that is that they are to be distinct. In 1 Corinthians 5:9-11, Paul's words make the assumption of a clear distinction between the church and the world.<sup>8</sup>

Do we assume that there is to be some kind of difference between the lives of those in the church and those in the world? Paul draws a sharp contrast. Membership in a local church is to be reflective (as best we can tell) of true membership in the body of Christ. . . . Do we understand the seriousness of the commitment we are making to them [potential new members] when they join the church, and have we communicated to them the seriousness of the commitment that they are making to us [the church]?<sup>9</sup>

As some have questioned what it even mean to be a church if in fact that church lacked the practice of church discipline.<sup>10</sup> It would no longer be distinguishable from the world. Church discipline is a practice that makes being a member of the church actually mean something.<sup>11</sup>

### D. Love

One of the greatest reasons and highest motivations for practicing church discipline is love.

#### 1. *Love for God*

Ultimately, practicing church discipline is an active way to show one's love for God. As noted above, it is obedience to Him. And as will be addressed, it honors His church and His name.

#### 2. *Love for the sinning member*

Concern for the erring brother, specifically His spiritual growth and restoration, is central to biblical church discipline (1 Cor 5:5; Mt 18:15). Discipline is an expression of love."<sup>12</sup> "The church that neglects to lovingly confront and correct its members is not being kind, generous, or gracious. Such a church is really hindering the Lord's work."<sup>13</sup>

This manifestation of love seeks the spiritual growth of the erring member. Scripture testifies to the fact the discipline, specifically rebuke can be used to encourage spiritual growth (Titus 1:13; Heb 12:10). In fact, 2 Thessalonians 3:14 states that discipline can be used to shame the errant individual of his disobedience, which is to bring him to obedience.

This thought leads to what many consider to be the ultimate purpose of church discipline: the restoration of the sinning member. When noting God's own purposes in discipline in Hebrews 12, one will notice that discipline's goal is healing, not ruin. Likewise, the purpose of church discipline could be summarized in the clause, "that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Cor 5:5 cf. James 5:19-20).<sup>14</sup> If restoration is not the goal of discipline, then the act is not true, biblical church discipline. The reason restoration is a vital element in church discipline is "so that we would not be outwitted by Satan" (2 Cor 2:11). Just like healing a body part sometimes entails purposefully breaking a bone, church discipline with all its unlikeable features must be for the purpose of restoration.

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<sup>8</sup> Dever. *Nine Marks*, 171.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>12</sup> Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 29.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

### 3. *Love for the church*

Love for other believers in addition to the erring member (if he is a believer) is also a motivation for practicing church discipline. Church discipline is a safeguard not only to the spiritual health of the member under discipline but to the church as a whole. 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 states that only a little yeast leavens the whole lump, and therefore, the church is to purge out the sinful member for its own health. “Neglect of discipline results in an impure church; and while we cannot get Christians out of the world, we can and should strive to get the world out of the church.”<sup>15</sup> Need one be reminded that Christ died for the Church so that He might present her without blemish (Eph 5:25-27)? Recognizing that sinners are directly accountable for their sin, the church should also be aware that the Bible implies those observing a sin by failing to act in light of it are also accountable (Prov. 24:11, 12).<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, sin is often viewed corporately by God (Rom 5:12; Heb 7:5). And although truly redeemed individuals are ultimately uncondemned before God (Rom 8:1), God still disciplines His children (Heb 12:7-8). With these facts in mind, God will hold the church as a whole responsible for the sin of one of its members if they do not practice church discipline. Neglect leaves them liable.

However, not only does church discipline have the negative side of protecting, it has the positive side of investing as J. Carl Laney shows from Acts 5.<sup>17</sup> Church discipline will cause church members to see the danger and seriousness of sin (1 Tim 5:20; Acts 5:5, 11). It also can create unity, purity, and spiritual growth in the church (Acts 5:12-14). Discipline provides good order in the church which creates an environment of spiritual growth and education.

## **E. The church’s influence**

### 1. *The church’s influence in its witness*

The scripture is full of references that indicate that is should be concerned with its public testimony both in the good works it produces and by the absence of sin (Mt 5:16; John 13:34-35; 1 Cor 5:1, 9-11; 1 Peter 2:12; 2 Thes 3:6, 14). The fact is that people notice differences, especially positive and attractive differences common among a whole community, a church.<sup>18</sup> This is why in the case of 1 Corinthians 5 “in some ways it seems that what Paul said to the church was more severe than what he said about the incestuous son.”<sup>19</sup> The more a church conforms to the surrounding world, the more difficult its efforts to evangelize will be.

### 2. *The church’s influence among its members*

One function church discipline has in regard to its internal testimony (to the church itself) is to, as the idiom goes, put ones money where his mouth is. “If words from the pulpit are not enforced by action [i.e., church discipline] from the congregation and the elders, members will learn that the church does not really mean what it says.”<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, failing to discipline leads to a loss of practical authority and influence. “It is not really surprising that we as a church should be instructed to judge. After all, if we cannot say how a Christian *should not* live, how can we say how a Christian *should* live?”<sup>21</sup> When the church begins to neglect discipline it become weak—no longer being able to compel its members to Godly living—and insignificant—losing its credibility among the lost.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 105-107.

<sup>18</sup> Dever. *Nine Marks*, 190.

<sup>19</sup> Adams. *Handbook of Church Discipline*, 68.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>21</sup> Dever. *Nine Marks*, 170.

## **F. God's glory**

Lastly, and certainly most importantly, as with anything in life, church discipline is to be to the praise of God's glory. Practicing church discipline reveals God's character of holiness, justice, love, etc. Consequently, through church discipline, God's attributes are to be on showcase. But to say it negatively, a lack of church discipline is a mark on God's reputation, seeing the church is His ambassador (2 Cor 5:20). "Our lives are the storefront display of God's character in His world. . . . We are to live lives that commend the Gospel to others."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, the church *must* purge the evil from its midst, for its "midst" is to be a representation of God.

## **G. What the purpose of church discipline is not**

First of all, church discipline should never be practiced because a church believes it has the final word on one's eternal destiny.<sup>23</sup> Secondly, it should not be practiced to execute judgment or punish (Rom 14). "The church has not been entrusted by God with the responsibility of executing judgment on errant saints. That is God's business."<sup>24</sup> Thirdly, church discipline is not a means of getting rid of unwanted church members. In fact, "church discipline is not intended to get rid of anybody," but to restore.<sup>25</sup> Fourthly, it is it a means for church leaders to dictatorially control the church. And lastly, although it may serve to shame individuals into repentance, it is not to be used to arbitrarily humiliate individuals.

### **III. How? The Manner of Church Discipline**

Having presented a brief analysis of church discipline and the purposes, reasons, and motivations behind the doctrine, the manner of church discipline—the core of this work—will finally be presented.

Two senses of the word "manner" can be narrowed down in regards to church discipline. First is the process or model of church discipline. Second is the spirit in which that process should be applied. Both senses will be dealt with in this section. The former will be handled first. But prior to developing the biblical model, two critical elements involved in the manner of church discipline must first be presented—preventative and personal discipline.

#### **A. Preventative discipline**

"Discipline is . . . a two-edged sword that has a preventative side and a corrective side."<sup>26</sup> And preventative discipline is at least equally as important, although at many times more important, than corrective discipline (what is typically thought of in regards to church discipline). Preventative discipline is difficult to define, for the term seems to indicate two distinct things. First, it may indicate those things that prevent formal church discipline, such as creating personal discipline (more on this later) in church members, having meaningful membership (i.e., only receiving baptized individuals as members), or having good relations among church members. Samuel Jones mentions various means by which good relations between members of a church can prevent incidences of discipline: love one another, avoid things which tend to counter such love, confront one another immediately on issues of offense, bear one

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>24</sup> Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 80.

<sup>25</sup> Adam, Jay E. *A Theology of Christian Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 287.

<sup>26</sup> Adams. *Handbook of Church Discipline*, 22.

another's burdens, promote peace and harmony, admonish each other and seek each other's spiritual wellbeing, encourage one another, etc.<sup>27</sup>

The second sense which preventative discipline can be taken is discipline that prevents sin, that which requires discipline. Although this latter sense be different, it fits within the former sense, for the latter sense "preventative" is taken to mean *that which prevent discipline* where as the former sense is taken to mean *discipline that prevents [sin]*, which would in fact prevent discipline. "The more preventative discipline there is the less corrective discipline there needs to be."<sup>28</sup> Yet the main idea of preventative discipline as will be spoken of here is the former sense, for the goal is not to prevent formal church discipline, because it is often a beneficial task, but to form habits resistant to sin.

In contrast to corrective discipline which may be called active discipline, preventative discipline may be called instructional discipline (Eph 6:4). This aspect of church discipline manifests itself in ways such as accountability, edification, the overall spiritual growth of members which produces personal discipline (more on this later), and the execution of church discipline which will place the seriousness of sin into the hearts of all who witness the discipline (1 Tim 5:20; Acts 5:5, 11). Preventative discipline is the responsibility of the leaders *and* congregation (Heb 10:24-25; Col 3:16) and in many sense should be a greater emphasis than corrective discipline. Finally, preventative discipline is absolutely essential for the existence of corrective discipline for "if we allow someone to grow distant from our fellowship without trying to find out why, there is little basis later for confrontation or healing."<sup>29</sup>

## B. Self-discipline

Self-discipline can be simply defined as each individual's first wall of defense against sin. A rather synonymous concept would be self-control or any other fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:23). That the church (elders and regular members alike) realize its responsibility to build up one another towards personal discipline is vital. Why?

It is only when one fails to exercise self-discipline that the process set forth in Matthew 18 [the model of church discipline] comes into play. But it is also important to realize that whenever there is success reconciling parties at any subsequent stage—one-on-one, one or two others, etc.—such success is incomplete if it does not go beyond the issue of the moment to deal with the offender's problem preventively in terms of self-discipline. That is to say, the party who failed to exercise self-control also must be helped, usually by counseling, so that in the future he will be able to face similar situations without losing self-control.<sup>30</sup>

By failing to recognize restoration in its total sense as the actual goal of church discipline, many misunderstand forgiveness as church discipline's proper end. Yet, a disciplined member needs more than forgiveness. The reason he fell the first time wasn't because he lacked forgiveness (as if forgiving him will fix his sin problem). He fell because of lack of self-discipline. Restoration, therefore, involves assisting members to develop self-discipline, which is why Jay Adams can accurately state that "self-discipline is the beginning and end of church discipline because it is the most basic element in all discipline."<sup>31</sup> Church discipline, "when

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<sup>27</sup> Jones, Samuel. *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, "A Treatise of Church Discipline and a Directory" (Hunt Valley: Sheridan Books, 2001), 150.

<sup>28</sup> Adams. *Handbook of Church Discipline*, 25.

<sup>29</sup> Bubna, Don. "Redemptive Love," *Leadership* 2 (Sumer 1981), 80.

<sup>30</sup> Adams. *Handbook of Church Discipline*, 29.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

successful, should result not merely in setting a matter straight, but also in helping the restored person become more self-disciplined.”<sup>32</sup> This is because those who have come to the point where they require church discipline often have not simply slipped up and surprisingly sin. That sin has become a pattern and lifestyle—something of which they will need to be freed—is much more probable.<sup>33</sup> And what better time to counsel an individual than when he is repentant, such as one who has repented as a result of being disciplined?<sup>34</sup>

### C. The Matthew 18 model

Matthew 18:15-20 (specifically verses 15-17) are probably the most well known verses concerning church discipline. For the most part, this text forms the basis for all other understanding of the doctrine. In verses 15-17 Jesus lays out four stages to follow when a brother offends another brother: 1) private rebuke, 2) private conference, 3) public announcement, and 4) public expulsion.

#### 1. Step 1 - private rebuke

Jesus’ words are plain, simple, and straightforward—if a brother (fellow professing believer) sins against you, privately rebuke him. This is the first step of church discipline. *Reprove* or *rebuke* is an intense word meaning to expose, convict, or convince someone of something, namely sin.<sup>35</sup>

Whose duty or obligation is it to confront? Jesus states, if your brother sins *against you*. Therefore, the seemingly obvious answer is that it is the responsibility of the one who was sinned against. However, “against you” is a textual variant and textual critics are rather uncertain and divided on whether it is original.<sup>36</sup> If the words “against you” are not original, then the original text would be referring to sin in general which needs confronting, rather than sin directed against an individual. This is significant, for in the latter case, anyone who knows of the sin is obligated to confront, whereas in the former, only the offended is told to confront. However, whether “against you” is original or not, Galatians 6:1 reveals that all believers are responsible for confronting sin. Church discipline isn’t primarily about the hurt feelings of the one offended but the spirituality and care of fellow brothers (i.e., the offender). Therefore, the obligation to confront is primarily the offended brother’s but also any believer who is aware of sin in a fellow believer. This is especially important in a case when the offended one might refuse to confront or the sin was not acted against anyone in particular.

In Matthew 5:23-24 Jesus also commands for the offender to go and reconcile himself to the one he offended. However, offenders often do not follow that command (whether out of disobedience or not realizing they have offended anyone). Therefore, in church discipline, Jesus commands the offended to go to the offender. If the offender is ignorant of his offense, going to him will inform him. If he is in rebellion, than he needs to be confronted. Matthew 5:23-24 in no way contradicts Matthew 18:15.

Jesus’ words are not informative or suggestive; they are imperative. Jesus obviously finds this confrontation at least somewhat important if he commands it. But why is it important? First, because, although the offender is told to come and reconcile himself (Mt 5:23-24), as noted he

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>35</sup> Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 49.

<sup>36</sup> Metzger, B. M., & United Bible Societies. *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, second edition a companion volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (4th rev. ed.)* (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 36.

often will not. Therefore, that the offended party go to the offender is imperative, otherwise the sin will never be dealt with. Ignoring sin is no small issue. “So often when someone is put out of the church for failure to repent of open, public sin, it is because there was a failure to exercise informal discipline at an earlier point before the sinful act became a habitual practice that had to be met with formal discipline.”<sup>37</sup> Secondly, if believers do not confront “hereby they may become guilty of other Men’s Sins, and also suffer the Name of God, and the Church, to lye under Reproach, and all thro their neglect.”<sup>38</sup>

But does the command to “go” necessitate confronting every known sin or offense under the sun? No. As Proverbs 10:12 states, love should cover a multitude of sins. The key is whether a brother is being debilitated spiritual, seemingly unrepentant, or there exists an unreconciled state. In such cases, confrontation is imperative.

As is obvious from the subtitle, this stage should be private—“between you and him alone” (Mt 18:15). Besides the fact that Christ commands this, a practical reason is that “if you go in the first instance accompanied by others, you may seem to have summarily decided against the offender, without giving him a hearing, and thus excite in him a spirit of *independence* and *defiance*.”<sup>39</sup> If at all possible, settle the issues privately between the two parties, and by so doing, keep that matter private from any slandering or gossip.

Asking the offender questions to make sure one is not assuming or misunderstanding as well as explaining one’s own perceptions and opinions on the matter to clear up any misunderstandings would also be beneficial. Not only will this sort of attitude clear up any potential misunderstandings, but it will also warm up the offender to receiving the potential rebuke well.

The last bit of advice would be to warn the individual of the proceeding stages of church discipline (more on this to come) should he refuse to repent. Not only can this be practiced in the first step, but any proceeding steps of church discipline. This is not to be done so as to threaten, or appear threatening, but to warn in honesty.

Finally, the potential results of this rebuke are either 1) he does not “listen” or 2) he “listens,” which leads to the question, what does “listen mean in this verse? Besides being the condition upon which continuation of discipline is decided, “listen” does not literally mean to intentional hear but to take *and apply* the advice given in the rebuke (i.e., repentance). Refusal to listen in every stage is always the condition for advancing to the next stage in discipline.

To this one might ask, “if one doesn’t repent, how much time should pass before moving to the next stage of discipline?” (which is a question, along with its answer, that universally applies to every stage of church discipline). But in reality, this is a poor question. Jesus does not say if he refuses to listen for x amount of time; Jesus says if he refuses to listen—period. Therefore, the issue is not length but nature—the nature of the refusal. In other words, is his refusal genuine or was it simply a hasty response? To answer this, wisdom and discernment must be involved. But the refusal is to be genuine, which means one should not necessarily approach the erring brother solely once and then move on to the next step in discipline. One should discern

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<sup>37</sup> Adams. *Handbook of Church Discipline*, 47.

<sup>38</sup> Keach, Benjamin. *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, “The Glory of a True Church, and its Discipline Display’d” (Hunt Valley: Sheridan Books, 2001), 81.

<sup>39</sup> Mell, P.H. *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, “Corrective Church Discipline” (Hunt Valley: Sheridan Books, 2001), 428.

between genuine refusal to repentant and failure to understand the rebuke (i.e., inability to grasp the viewpoint of the one rebuking).<sup>40</sup>

Likewise, doing an adequate job listening to the offender's response is also sound advice in order to discern whether the offender has genuinely refused or simply misunderstood. In summary, adequate time should be allowed for reflection, repentance, and a *definite*, not hasty, decision to repent or not. Discernment is key.

On the other hand, if he listens the response is restoration (note: not just forgiveness). But an important question that emerges is whether or not this repentant individual is to make a public confession. The answer is no, for the sin is still a private offense and so it is to be dealt with privately. Only those sins that are public are to be confessed publically. Therefore, only private confession to those involved is required. As will be a reoccurring principle throughout this paper, one of the reasons for confessions is the church's reputation—that the hearers of a confession might understand that the church does not take sin lightly. Consequently, a general rule of thumb for every stage of church discipline is that confession need only be made to those aware of the offense.

## 2. *Step 2 - private conference*

If the erring brother refuses to listen during stage 1, stage 2, private conference, is to be enacted. But “as you read the words of our Lord in that passage [Matthew 18:15], you get the impression that it is only reluctantly, when all else fails, that more and more persons may be called in. The ideal seems to be to keep the matter as narrow as possible.”<sup>41</sup> In this stage Jesus states, “take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses” (Mt 18:16). So obviously, an important part of this stage is the inclusion of witnesses.

This leads to a very important question: what does it mean for these individuals to be witnesses? In other words, of what are they witnesses? One proposed answer is that they are to be witnesses of the sin itself. Having seen the original sin, they are able to support the rebuke by affirming its validity. However, a significant problem exists with this view. If there were witnesses to the sin, than the sin was not private to begin with and therefore at least the first stage of church discipline ought to have been skipped (a principle which we'll be developed later on under “variations,” III.D.1.).<sup>42</sup>

The proper understanding is that these individuals are witnesses to the rebuke that occurs in this second stage. And if the offender still refuses to listen and the discipline needs to be taken to the third stage, announcing the offense before the church, these individuals will be able to witness or testify of the rebuke of stage 2. As one will note from the biblical text, these witnesses are not called witnesses originally, but only later (which should be understood to be during the public announcement of stage 3). In short, they are witnesses to the confrontation, not the original act of sin.

The second question is why does Jesus command the use of these other individuals? Part of this question has been answered above for they may serve as witnesses. But is that their sole purpose? Not likely. They will also serve to mediate between the two parties, attempting to make sure Christian character is being exemplified at all times. They also should function as some sort of officiators for the rebuke, listening to both sides without bias, making sure both sides are heard, and making sure the rebuke occurs properly and in the right spirit. If at all possible, the

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<sup>40</sup> Adams. *Handbook of Church Discipline*, 58.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

issue is to be settled privately between the two parties, and by so doing the matter shall be kept private from any slandering or gossip. Lastly, “if, after they hear him [the offender], they are satisfied that he is wrong, they can tell him so, and add their influence to yours to bring him right,” strengthening the rebuke and affirming the conviction.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, if they believe the accusation is illegitimate, they can encourage the accuser to drop his charge and then they can reconcile the two.

Confronting an individual with the company of others may come across as threatening or intimidating. This should not be the intent and great caution should be taken to communicate this. The goal is for the erring individual to recognize the seriousness of his sin and consequently repent.<sup>44</sup>

Who should these witnesses be? The answer is any member, including but not limited to elders and deacons. This role, however, calls for someone who is able to give wise advice and provide guidance in the situation. When seeking out witnesses, the erring brother’s name should not be released to the potential witnesses in case they deny the request.<sup>45</sup> In like manner, if the sin is private and personal, witnesses should always ask the accuser if he has followed the first stage of church discipline prior to agreeing to participate in the second stage.

Finally, as with every stage of church discipline, two potential results exist: 1) he repents or 2) he does not repent. If he does not repent, step three should be pursued. If he repents, as always, forgiveness should be granted and restoration should begin. But the question again emerges, if he repents during this stage of church discipline must he make a public confession? As before, only a confession before those involved (the offender, accuser, witnesses, etc.) is needed.

### 3. *Step 3 - public announcement*

The third stage in church discipline, should it be necessary, is to announce the matter before the church. Surely there are those who debate what the nature of “church” is in this context (is it synonymous to Paul’s use of “church” or should it simply be translated “assembly,” not referring to the body of Christ?), but for the purpose of this paper, that “church” means the same thing in this text as in various other NT texts will be presupposed. Even if “church” should be as a generic assembly and is not ecclesiastical whatsoever, Jesus is still commanding NT believers and NT believers make up the church. Therefore, this text is at the least applicable to the church, if not directly addressed to it.

A similar question should be asked about the antecedent of “it” in verse 17. What is being told to the church? As a matter of fact, “it” is not a part of the original text. Almost all English translations add it, most assuredly to make the meaning more clear. The verse could literally be translated, “speak to the church” without the object “it.” With all this said, that “it”—what is being spoken to the church—is the original offense or sin seems obvious from the context. It seems to go without saying.

Jesus’ words are not very descriptive though. He lacks clear and precise instructions on how to “speak to the church.” Should an announcement be made in the church bulletin, after the Sunday service, at a separate meeting for members only? Because Jesus does not answer these questions, it appears various methods may be practiced. But certainly caution and discernment should always be used and prayers for guidance should be made. Reasonably, however, some incidences seem almost always to be inappropriate, and therefore, should be avoided. Some

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<sup>43</sup> Mell. “Corrective Church Discipline,” 429.

<sup>44</sup> Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 53-54.

<sup>45</sup> Adams. *Handbook of Church Discipline*, 61.

examples of such scenarios would include, but are not limited to, standing up in the middle of a service and announcing the matter prior to informing the elders of one's plan or announcing the matter in front of unbelievers. (The text specifically states to "speak to the *church*"; there is no need to hurt the witness of the church if the sin is unknown to unbelievers). Also, care should be taken not to expose more information than necessary, lest the one being disciplined become bitter. Remember, the goal is love and restoration. The congregation doesn't need to know specific details about the sin, but the general nature may be beneficial in helping them help the individual.<sup>46</sup> Essentially, "no matter how the case is brought before the church, it should be done in such a way that encourages the congregation to find its role in bringing the brother or sister to repentance."<sup>47</sup>

The existence of witnesses from the previous step seems to suggest that some sort of church "trial" would be beneficial during this third stage. The trial need not be formal as in a court hearing (which is probably ill-advised), but a time for the accuser to bring his accusation, the witnesses to give witness, for the offender to repent if he would, and for the supposed offender to give a defense should be given, for "church-trials are designed not only to convict the guilty, but to clear the innocent who have been accused."<sup>48</sup>

In regards to all of this one might ask why a public announcement should be made. What is the purpose? 1 Timothy 5:20 clearly states, "As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear." Although this is specifically in reference to elders, something that seems to be transferable is the idea of communicating to the other believers the serious nature of sin and that the church does not take sin lightly. At the same time, a public announcement should not be exercised in order to embarrass or as a means of punishment.

Another reason the congregation is told is so that they may join in the efforts of pursuing this erring brother's repentance and restoration. "The number of persons who know about the problem increases with each step, thus bringing more and more persons into the area of help. If a brother will not discipline himself, than another must take that task on himself."<sup>49</sup> So what can the congregation do to help? First, they should take note of the individual (2 Thes 3:14). Second, they are to "keep away" from this individual (2 Thes 3:6; 1 Cor 5:9, 11). This does not mean they shouldn't reach out to him, because thirdly, they are to warn him (2 Thes 3:15; Gal 6:1-2). "Keep away" then carries with it the idea of not having association or recognizing their fellowship in Christ has been affected, at least temporarily.

Again, the potential results of such discipline are 1) he repents or 2) he refuses to repent. If he refuses to repent, than discipline will unfortunately be carried on to the final stage—expulsion. But if he does repent forgiveness should be granted and restoration begun. Instead of making a private confession, at this stage one ought to make a public confession of sin, for the matter now concerns the entire church and the testimony of the church would be at stake if the matter was left unhandled in the public's eyes.

#### 4. *Step 4 - public expulsion*

The final stage of church discipline is expulsion or withdrawal and removal from fellowship. As Matthew 18:17 states, "And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Speaking in a Jewish context, "Gentile" could literally

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>47</sup> Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 55.

<sup>48</sup> Mell. "Corrective Church Discipline," 430.

<sup>49</sup> Adams. *Handbook of Church Discipline*, 71.

be taken as “heathen.” Tax-collectors, on the other hand, were viewed as traitors to their Jewish society since they went as far as to work for the hated Roman oppressors. To the Jewish mind, these figures were outcasts, outsiders to the community. Therefore, what Jesus is essentially saying is that the church is to treat the unrepentant member just as he is acting (1 John 3:4-10)—one outside the church, an unsaved individual. But notice, the church is not called to make claims about this individual’s salvation, but to simply *treat* him as he is acting. Such a judgment, therefore, does not make him unsaved or claim he is unsaved but is a functional judgment. Yet a logical part of treating someone as unsaved is “to keep loving him as Jesus loved the publicans and sinners. It means to reach out to him in witness, but not to relate to him as a member of the body of Christ.”<sup>50</sup>

2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 presents a rather nice outline of how this functional judgment is to take place. First, Paul states to mark or take note of the individual. Second, he says, “and have nothing to do with him.” This phrase speaks of the synonymous concept that Jesus had in mind when He said to treat one as a publican and heathen. Other ways in which the NT states this concept include keeping away from or avoiding the individual (2 Thes 3:6; Rom 16:17), removing the individual from among the believers (1 Cor 5:2), delivering the individual to Satan (1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tim 1:20), cleansing out leaven (1 Cor 5:7), and purging evil from midst of the church (1 Cor 5:13). The main thrust is that the church is to have no association with this individual. He is no longer to be regarded as part of the church and the church’s actions towards him should reflect this.

Does this mean members should avoid him completely or ignore him? Certainly not. But when they are in contact with him, they should be confronting him and presenting his need for repentance, maybe even salvation (seeing he is to be treated as an unsaved individual). This is seen by Paul’s next words not to consider him an enemy but *warn* him as a brother. Therefore, confrontation and communication is certainly involved.

And thirdly, what might be seen as a harsh act is balanced by Paul’s mention that that the church is to admonish him *as a brother*. Jesus said he is to be treated as an unbeliever, but now Paul says in another sense to treat him as a brother. Both instructions layout a fine balance that should be persuade between taking the sin seriously and still loving the individual.

The congregation’s role is vital in the success of church discipline at this stage, hence the term “*church discipline*.” As Paul says, church discipline is administered “by the majority” (2 Cor 2:6). All members have a responsibility to treat the erring individual as a non-believer. Some out of sincere sympathy may cause harm to the disciplinary process by not fulfilling their duty to treat this individual as an erring brother. Each member has the responsibility to love the erring brother and not become bitter or malicious. And lastly, the entire church is responsible for encouraging restoration and ministering to the erring individual. “The discipline itself acknowledges that the sin is not acceptable, but living restoration acknowledges that the sinner is.”<sup>51</sup>

2 Corinthians 5:2 reveals that mourning is also the proper response of the congregation to this final stage of discipline. Mourning recognizes the seriousness of the sin and should involve self-examination to see if the church could improve something in order to prevent such incidences from happening further.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Bubna Donald L. “Redemptive Love: The Key to Church Discipline,” *Leadership Journal* 2 (Summer 1981), 82.

<sup>51</sup> Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 57.

<sup>52</sup> Adams. *Handbook of Church Discipline*, 88.

Expulsion from the church is the most serious stage in church discipline. And because this step is expulsion from the *church*, this is not to be the decision of one individual but the church. But what does a decision by the church mean in this context? The elders, a unanimous decision, a majority vote? Understanding the doctrine of congregational government, the church leaders ought not to be the sole voice in this matter. The congregation ought to decide.

But must the decision be unanimous as some might suggest due to the fact that the term “church” denotes every single member? As these proponents suggest, this certainly would disallow division from occurring over the discipline. However, unanimity is impractical (not that practicality is the measure of soundness). But beyond practicality, understanding the use of “church” as requiring a unanimous vote appears to be reading between the lines, for the text does not say the church must completely agree, but only that the church is the subject of the action, however that action may take place. Nowhere does Jesus state how that decision is to be made. 2 Corinthians 2:6 may shed some light on the discussion when Paul refers to the punishment as being inflicted by the many or majority, but ultimately, scripture is not definitive. Therefore, each church should determine a rule that seems best to them and place it in its constitution.

Some might ask, what is the purpose of expulsion? Primarily, as always in church discipline, the goal is restoration (1 Cor 5:5). Therefore, expulsion is to be motivated by sincere care for the excluded member and carried out in a way that promotes repentance and healing. But in response some might wonder how removal is restorative. Unfortunately, sometimes it is not. Sometimes the end result isn't repentance, but at least the purity of the church is kept and scripture is obeyed. As 1 John 2:19 reveals, whether the individual returns or not is often an indication of his salvation.

On the other hand, withdrawal *is* occasionally restorative. In 1 Corinthians 5:5 Paul lays out the purpose of this stage: “you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” This is a bizarre wording that puzzles most. Various interpretations have been suggested such as Jay Adam's: “Contumacious believers are also removed from the church and handed over to Satan, who is used by God in His wise providence to chastise them and bring them back to Himself.”<sup>53</sup> However, as strange as the first half of the verse may be, and whatever it may mean, the second half is clearer: the purpose of expulsion is restoration. As 1 Timothy 1:20 shows, this handing over to Satan is for the purpose of teaching. For instance, expulsion often shames the individual (2 Thes 3:14) in hope that he might repent.

Should the erring member repent, forgiveness and practical steps of restoration should be made. Because the sin and discipline have reached the public sphere, public confession would be needed to acknowledge to the whole church he has repented and to the community that the church takes sin seriously. If a public confession is not made, a vital purpose of church discipline, the integrity of the church in the public eye, is nullified.

Finally, should an expelled member know he is innocent, he should seek to prove his innocence to the church, and the church should not deny such an attempt. Typically such an attempt reveals genuineness. But if his case or attempt is denied, he should act with discernment and prayer for scripture is silent regarding this dilemma and each case will vary.

#### **D. Variations (or additions) to the Matthew 18 model**

In addition to the model of church discipline presented in Matthew 18, scripture includes some variations, or exceptions, to the typical procedure.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 79.

### *1. Publically known sin*

One circumstance which creates such an exception is public knowledge of sin. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul seems to disobey the rules of order presented in Matthew 18 when he commands the Corinthians to expel a man prior to their carrying out of the first steps of church discipline (v.2). “Was Paul exercising some special, apostolic prerogative? Absolutely not. As a matter of fact, he calls the church ‘arrogant’ (v. 2) for not removing him on their own without his prompting.”<sup>54</sup>

But what is the cause of this exception? The answer: the publicity of sin. In other words, when a member’s sin is public rather than private (as Paul states in verse 1: “It is widely reported”), private confrontation is unnecessary for the matter is by nature public and therefore the discipline should correspond by handling the situation publically. The principle to be drawn from this text is that church discipline is to “deal with the problem on the level at which it presents itself, making every effort to involve no one other than those already involved.”<sup>55</sup> Therefore, depending on the situation (i.e., how publically known the sin is), not only can discipline skip all the way to the final stage, but it could potentially skip to the second or third stage as well.<sup>56</sup>

But understanding that the sin is public, why does Paul instruct the Corinthians to jump to stage 4 instead of stage 3 in the process of church discipline? Why not confront the man and plead for him to repent rather than simply expel him? If the only people who knew about this man’s sin were church members, this suggestion would seem appropriate. But one can assume from Paul’s actions and description of the sin being widely known (1 Cor 5:1) that this sin was known by those outside the church. This explains why expulsion is commanded, for the church’s reputation was at stake.

Yet what if the individual, realizing he is about to face expulsion, should repent prior to being withdrawn from? Must expulsion be carried out in order to guard the testimony of the church? Repentance is always the sole condition of restoration and forgiveness, but at the same time, the church’s testimony is at stake. A public confession resolves this predicament by restoring him while at the same time guarding the church’s reputation.

Another issue in this exception is who bears the obligation to confront in the case of publically known sin. For private sin, those who are aware of the sin are commanded to confront. But since publically known sins skip stages in the disciplinary process, it is the church’s responsibility, in particular, the elders. But if they for some reason are ignorant of the public sin, any member is obligated to bring the matter to the elders’ attention so that the church as a whole can confront the individual.

To hear the supposed sinner and allow him to give a defense is especially important, in case the public testimony is simply rumor and false. Such a testimony, although it may initially be given privately to the elders, should eventually reach the ears of the congregation so that the individual’s reputation may be cleared and likewise the church’s reputation.

### *2. The discipline of elders*

The second exception, which is more an addition than an exception, to the typically Matthew 18 process of church discipline occurs with the unfortunate discipline of an elder.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 37.

Obviously, avoiding such an instance is preferred. Only electing individuals to the role of elder who meet the qualifications (1 Tim 3; Titus) would help prevent such discipline, but elders are still sinful and require discipline from their church just as anyone else.

1 Timothy 5:19-22 presents a model for disciplining elders. First, the passage states that discipline is to be enacted for persistence in sin (v.20). Notice, Paul does not say “really bad sins” but “sin.” Nor does he say “for sinning once” but for *persisting* in sin. To sum, all unrepented sin requires discipline. However, caution is to be advised. As verse 19 states, two or three witnesses are needed (most likely the witnesses from stage 2) to make a legitimate accusation, for even an acquitted charge is still extremely damaging to an elder’s reputation. Further, that discipline only occurs for actual sin and not simply disagreement or displeasure on the end of a member should be made sure.<sup>57</sup> Elders are under especial spiritual attack, and the honor given to their office should be reflected in the caution given in bringing a charge against them. Should a charge be made, for the elder to temporarily give up his duties during the accusation may be advisable, for the elder’s trustworthiness may certainly be in question at least temporarily and his ministries would consequently suffer.

In addition to taking caution when making an accusation against an elder, 1 Timothy 5:21 reveals that impartiality and avoiding bias are also equally important. Being impartial is important in all cases of church discipline, but Paul possibly mentions it in reference to the discipline of elders due to the fact that many a church member would like to overlook sin in their beloved elder’s life. Although this may seem loving, such action is actually quite contrary to love.

If an elder, after entering the office of overseer, begins failing to meet the qualifications that are originally required to obtain his office (1 Tim 3; Titus), he should willingly step down or be removed from that position. In other word, at all times is the elder to meet the requirements of eldership, not just initially. If he is repentant, as for anyone else, the restoration stage of church discipline should be enacted. Churches may find it necessary and helpful to relieve the repentant elder of his ministry for a short period of time, so that he can be restored properly and regain the trust of the congregation.

Paul mentions in verse 20, unrepentant elders are to be rebuked before all (meaning the whole church). Does this mention of public rebuke nullify the private stages of church discipline in the case of elders, creating an exception to the discipline of elders? Although the text is not definitive, most likely Paul’s words (the mention of witnesses for example) assume that the first steps in the Matthew 18 process have already been completed (if the sin was not originally public; cf. III.D.1. above), hence the words “as for those who *persist* in sin.” No *practical* reason seems arguable to understand the text otherwise. Why make a private matter of sin public, especially in light of the damaged reputation of the elder and his church that would result from such exposure? In other words, no exception appears to exist for the discipline of elders; private sin of an elder, just as the sin of anyone else, should be disciplined initially on the private level. However, if the sin is originally public, just as for anyone else, the matter should begin at the public level.

But say in the case of the elder’s discipline for public sin, prior to being rebuked the elder repents. Is the public rebuke still necessary? The answer to this question comes from understanding the purpose of an elder’s public rebuke. One ought not to perform a public rebuke “just because,” but in light of its purpose. If a public rebuke does not fulfill this purpose, than it appears quite arbitrary and unnecessary. The reason Paul gives instruction to public rebuke a

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<sup>57</sup> Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 120.

disciplined elder is found in his words, “so that the rest may stand in fear” (1 Tim 5:20), that the congregation may see the seriousness of sin and examine themselves. Surely the integrity of the church is also a motivator for such a rebuke. In light of these purposes, a public confession would suffice. In a sense, one could view this as a *self*-rebuke, and consequently, if done properly, it can fulfill the purpose of a public rebuke. But that is not to say this conclusion is not driven by pragmatism. Despite being pragmatic, in this passage Paul seems to be indicating that public rebuke is reserved for those who *unrepentantly persist* to sin. Nowhere does he state to rebuke a *repentant* elder. He is addressing a narrow topic.

If such a public rebuke of an elder is to occur, extreme caution must be taken. In one sense, the church needs to protect its reputation before the community by not tolerating the sin, even in one of its leaders. But at the same time, the church should be careful not to destroy the man’s reputation, for 1) it may hurt any potential future ministry he might have, and 2) the public tends to use the fall of church leaders to ridicule the sake of Christ and His Church (specifically the local church from which the leader was from).

On the condition of the elder’s repentance, as always, restoration should be made. If the desire is for him to regain his office, he must re-meet the qualifications, which may take an extremely long time. “There is a sense in which the church must restore the leader. But there is also a sense in which the leader must restore himself. He must restore his reputation. He must restore his credibility. He must restore trust in the minds of those whom he has failed.”<sup>58</sup>

Finally, the responsibility of the *church* to potentially discipline its elder implies the responsibility of the church to know the scriptural texts on church discipline.

#### **E. The duty of outside churches**

More than likely, outside churches will eventually become involved to some degree in cases of church discipline which are not directly their own. The purpose of this section is to present the duty of a congregation that may find itself involved in a case of church discipline in another congregation. In short, its duty is to *not* receive a disciplined brother of another church into membership.

The indicative for this imperative is that in receiving a disciplined brother of another church, that church’s discipline is nullified and that church’s autonomy is violated. The NT frequently indicates the autonomy of each local church to govern itself free of external interference (Mt 18:17; 1 Cor 5; 2 The 3:6, 14; Acts 1:5, 23; 6:3, 15:4; 21:22). This autonomy does not cease to exist in the realm of church discipline. If anything, in church discipline autonomy is more necessary than other areas of church polity. Jesus and Paul assume church autonomy in disciplining (Mt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:12-13). John praises a church who practices such jurisdiction (Rev 2:2-6) while condemning churches who don’t (Rev 2:14-16, 20), which assumes they have the authority.<sup>59</sup>

If churches have not the Power to deal with and excommunicate disorderly persons without their consent, then, when the Saviour instructed the offended to carry the offender before the church, He but MOCKED HIM; when He praised the church at Ephesus for trying the false apostles, He gave them credit for that which was but TEMERITY and PRESUMPTION; and when He chided Pergamos and Thyatira for tolerating wicked persons, He *unjustly held them accountable for that over which they had no control.*<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>59</sup> Mell. “Corrective Church Discipline,” 447.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 448.

Church discipline implies autonomy, and autonomy implies that “the local church has jurisdiction over its members.”<sup>61</sup>

“The *independence* of a church is infringed upon when other churches, associations, or councils, either voluntarily, or at the instigation of her recusant member, interfere with her discipline, or otherwise attempt forcible to control her.”<sup>62</sup> One might claim that his church also is independent and therefore can independently choose to accept another church’s disciplined member. But then in claiming his own church’s autonomy he violates the autonomy of another church by making void its independent decision to expel its member. This argument is therefore self-refuting.

Further, receiving a discipline member of another church prevents the goal of that church’s discipline: restoration. Receiving an individual into one’s membership that is rightly under discipline violates all the purposes for church discipline’s existence. It violates the other church’s goal of restoration, it brings leaven into one’s own midst, and it damages the reputation of the receiving church before the community. All of this is why one can conclude that

when one Church shall receive a Member or Members of another Congregation without their consent or Knowledge: Nay such that are Disorderly and may be loose Livers, or cast out for Immorality; or Persons filled with Prejudice without cause. This is enough to make Men Atheists, or condemn all Church Authority, and Religion: For hath not one regular Church as great Authority from Christ as another.<sup>63</sup>

In light of this imperative presented above, churches should take steps to avoid interfering with another church’s autonomy, namely in the sphere of church discipline. Steps may include communicating with fellow local churches on a regular basis, possibly forming a policy with other local churches, and being deliberate to obtain background information on potential new members, lest they be a disciplined member of another church.

However, is this to say there are no exceptions to the rule? First, if a disciplined individual desires to join another church, he may do so as long as he first resolves the issue with his former/current church. Second, if the church discipline can be without a doubt proven to have been misguided in the sense that this individual was in fact innocent, one should meet with the disciplining church to converse with them over such evidence. If the disciplining church still feels their discipline was appropriate, then only if certain they are misguided may a church receive the mistreated brother. But note, such a case should only occur if, and *only if*, the church looking to receive this brother contacts and has a thorough discussion with the church that disciplined its member. Further, one cannot receive a disciplined brother simply because he was expelled in an unbiblical *manner*. He must actually be innocent or reconciled with his church. Third, if a member was discipline for holding a supposed doctrinal err that the potential receiving church actually holds, it may receive the individual. “Church sovereignty is not violated if we receive those who are martyrs to the same truth we conscientiously hold ourselves.”<sup>64</sup> Finally, when considered receiving an expelled brother a church must ask itself honestly if it is willing to violate the autonomy of the another church. With this perspective, doing so should be seen as a last resort.

Finally, how should a church respond should another church violate its autonomy by receiving one of its members being disciplined? First, the other church should be informed in

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 446.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 449.

<sup>63</sup> Keach. “The Glory of a True Church,” 81.

<sup>64</sup> Mell. “Corrective Church Discipline,” 471.

case it is unaware that its new member is actually under the discipline of another church. If such information by itself does not provoke this church to disallow the individual from being one of its members, confrontation and persuasion from the text of scripture should be made for it to do so.

#### **F. The manner of the rebuking process**

Having discussed the biblical method or steps of church discipline, one would do well to take note of the manner, attitude, or spirit in which church discipline should be enacted. As an overarching principle, church discipline should be carried out in a manner that will encourage spiritual growth. This requires being interested in the welfare of the disciplined individual. "A rebuke is restorative when it has the offender's best interest at heart and is designed not to punish, but to bring healing."<sup>65</sup> Second, discipline should be motivated by love (Prov 3:11-12; Rev 3:19). Corrective church discipline should only be practiced "out of love for the offending party and the members of the church individually, and ultimately out of our love for God Himself."<sup>66</sup> Love for the individual involves a spirit of gentleness and bearing his burdens (Gal 6:1-2). In reference to Galatians 6:1, Mark Dever states, "Paul was concerned not just with *what* was to be done in such a difficult situation but also with *how* it was to be done" (emphasis added).<sup>67</sup>

Being sensitive to individuals under discipline is crucial, as seen by Paul's statement for the Corinthians to accept their erring member lest he become too discouraged (2 Cor 2:7); the discipline had been sufficient. "Because church discipline is designed to be corrective rather than punitive, the sinner's situation, spiritual sensitivity and state of repentance must be considered as church discipline is exercised."<sup>68</sup> "Discipline which is so inflexible as to leave no place for restoration and reconciliation has ceased to be truly Christian."<sup>69</sup>

Therefore, variation in manner is often required. For example, in some instance, a sharp reprove is beneficial (Titus 1:13; cf. 2 Tim 4:2) whereas other times a gentle appeal is preferable (1 Tim 5:1-2). Paul's writings evidence his sensitivity and flexibility to each distinct situation of discipline rather than a strict "one size fits all" application to every case.<sup>70</sup> To ignore the individual's personal situation, spirituality, and special needs for the sake of following a procedure to the letter would defeat the purpose of church discipline and be unfortunate.<sup>71</sup>

That discipline should be prayerful is self-evident. As with other areas of ecclesiology (1 Cor 14:10), orderliness is needed. "What is true of the church service is also true of the entire life of the church as a body. All [things] must be done with order and decency."<sup>72</sup> One way in which orderliness can relate to church discipline is through meaningful church membership. What would it mean to be expelled from membership is membership means next to nothing? And finally, church discipline should be done in a way that takes sin seriously.

Some cautions can be made in regards to the manner of church discipline. First, hypocritical discipline *must* be avoided (Mt 7:1-5). Condemning sin through discipline yet condoning it is one's lifestyle strips a church of its voice. Second, as Paul says in Galatians 6:1,

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<sup>65</sup> Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 121.

<sup>66</sup> Dever. *Nine Marks*, 187.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>68</sup> Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 69.

<sup>69</sup> Hughes, Robert B. *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 36.

<sup>70</sup> Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 70.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>72</sup> Adams. *Handbook of Church Discipline*, 16.

“keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted,” and in 1 Corinthians 10:12, “let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.” Third, always be aware of the possibility that one may be misjudging a situation. Paul instructs believers to speak the *truth* in love (Eph 4:15), not an assumption or hasty conclusion.

And finally, ways in which a church should avoid practicing discipline would include, but are not limited to, manners which are vindictive, arrogant, punitive, dictatorial, or in a spirit of superiority (Rom 12:19; 1 Peter 5:3).

### **G. The restoration process**

Finally, having presented the Matthew 18 model of church discipline, additions and exceptions to such a model, and the spirit in which the model is to be carried out, restoration becomes the final matter of discussion. The inclusion of restoration, what is hopefully the final stage in church discipline, is potentially the most important inclusion in this entire discussion on the manner of church discipline. If a church fails to restore a repentant member, the church fails to complete the disciplinary process, making the entire process in many senses nullified. And notice, the title of this section is not simply “restoration” but “the restoration *process*.” This is because restoration is much more than a one-time event of forgiveness, but a means of re-establishing a member and assisting him to develop self-discipline so that he might not fall prey to sin’s clutches once again.

The beginning of this restoration process, of course, is repentance—the sole condition for restoration and forgiveness (Luke 17:3). Along with repentance, a confession of sin and request for forgiveness should always be made by the disciplined member, for doing so makes repentance known to others so that forgiveness might be granted and restoration begun. A principle which has been established throughout the course of this work, but will be summarized here, is that confession of sin should be made at the level at which the sin is known (i.e., private, semi-public, public) in addition to those directly offended. “Formal reinstatement must be made as publicly as dismissal was, and in the same manner if possible.”<sup>73</sup> Public confessions are beneficial in that they present the opportunity for a church to put the matter definitively in the past.

How detailed should this public confession be? Detailed “enough for those who have been offended, hurt, or deceived to recognize the particular sin involved.”<sup>74</sup> Particular acts and details of sin would be better left out if possible since the focus of the confession is to be forgiveness and restoration and not shame. If discipline has reached the formal stages (stage 3 or 4), church elders should privately speak with the one who is to confess about guidelines for the confession which will be made.

Having discussed what initiates the restoration process, what composes the restoration process? In 2 Corinthians 2:7-8 Paul lays out excellent instructions about how restoration should be made and what it involved. He states, 1) forgive, 2) comfort, and 3) reaffirm love.

Forgiveness is the first step of restoration (v.7). Seeing that repentance is the sole requirement for restored fellowship (Luke 17:3), restoration to fellowship and forgiveness should be made immediately at the moment the individual’s repentance is made known. Neither a church nor any of its members should decide to wait for proof of such repentance. Just as quick as the church is to administer discipline, they are to forgive and welcome back repentant

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>74</sup> Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 156.

members.<sup>75</sup> And should the individual keep struggling with his sin and need further forgiveness, it must be granted (Mt 18:22; Lk 17:4). Believers have no right to withhold forgiveness to those who request it in light of God having forgiven them, which ought to be their motivation to forgive (Eph 4:32). Forgiveness is not an option but a commandment from the Lord (Lk 17:3-4). In fact, those who fail to forgive are liable to church discipline themselves and should be rebuked.

Some might say, “If we forgive him just because he repents then we’re letting him off the hook.” On the contrary, the goal of the discipline will have been achieved. Remember, church discipline’s purpose is not punitive but restorative. If formal discipline continues after repentance, discipline has simply turned into punishment. And if repentance is not the condition of restoration, what is? Further, how would one even determine how long this *punishment* is to last?

At the same time, sin and its affects are not to be taken lightly. Therefore, an insincere “sorry” is not what is meant by repentance. Repentance is to be genuine. Besides providing an opportunity for forgiveness, the disciplined individual’s confession will hopefully serve to prove the genuineness of his acclaimed repentance. Likewise, *although fruit is not to be a condition to be waited for in order for forgiveness to be granted*, fruit (Luke 3:8) such as good deeds (Acts 26:20), acknowledgment of sin (1 John 1:9), desire to make restitution (Phm 18-19), and sorrow over sin (2 Cor 7-8-10) will serve as signs of genuine repentance. And should repentance prove to be insincere and fake, disciplinary action should be reinforced. If one simply pretends to repent in order to avoid discipline, his attempt will soon be discovered by the church, especially if his fellow members become involved in his life as a part of the biblical restoration process.

Yet forgiveness is certainly not the end of restoration. Simply forgiving the member leaves him unrestored. Paul states that the second step is to comfort the restored brother (v.7). This step, as well as the next, is incredibly easy to neglect. Having forgiven the member, the matter is often soon forgotten. Instead a congregation ought to come alongside the brother and comfort him. Distancing oneself and isolating the individual due to the awkwardness of the situation is all too easy and all too dangerous, for the member needs comfort. “Comfort,” *parakaleo* in the Greek text, is a word not only including the idea of helping the individual overcome potential sorrow caused by his sin but probably even more so containing the idea of exhorting, encouraging, and spurring the individual on to right living. In other words, this second step most likely includes much follow up and counseling to develop self-discipline. This act of comforting is vital in order to keep the individual from falling back into his sin.

The third step Paul mentions is to reaffirm one’s love to the member (v.8). “Reaffirm” is not simply to state forgiveness, but to show one’s love through action. The disciplined member should have no doubt in his mind that his sin is behind him and that his church has received him. This step most certainly involves the reconciliation of the member with individuals he may have hurt in his sin.

The purpose of restoration is indicated by Paul’s words, “or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” (2 Cor 2:7), and, “so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs” (v.11). Active restoration is important for Satan is looking to be destructive and deceitful.

And finally, one last point should be mentioned before moving on to the next heading. The success of church discipline should not be viewed on whether or not it results in the

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<sup>75</sup> Adam, *A Theology of Christian Counseling*, 291.

restoration of the individuals disciplined. Successful discipline occurs when a church follows the instructions given scripture, regardless of what the results may be.

#### IV. When? Sins requiring Church Discipline

Having presented a rather exhaustive model of *how* to perform church discipline, it would be helpful to know *when* to actually enact it. Scripture is full of references to sins which would demand church discipline (Mark 7:21-22; 1 Cor 5:11; 6:9-10; 11:6; Gal 5:19-21; 2 Tim 3:1-5; Titus 3:10; Rom 16:17; 1 Thes 5:14; 2 Thes 3:6, 11; Eph 5:5; 3 John 9-10), which can be categorized as practical error and doctrinal error. Having compiled these references, should one compile a list of sins that must be disciplined, as opposed to the sins that do not require discipline? Certainly not. These verse are prescriptive, but also descriptive, and certainly not exhaustive. On the contrary, *any* known sin out to be disciplined.

As a general rule of thumb, those actions or beliefs that characterize an unbeliever ought to have nothing to do with the church, a community of professing believers. Along this line, even the first signs of sinful habit should be confronted in a private context, as discussed under “Preventative discipline” (III.A.). Although some might suggest church discipline seems a bit drastic for some “smaller, insignificant sins,” it should be noted that “they are blemishes and defects which should, by a judicious treatment, be corrected; they constitute stumbling-blocks to unbelievers, and a dangerous example for other disciples. They be all evils. Therefore put away the evils, or the evil-doers.”<sup>76</sup>

Does this mean churches are to discipline every act of sin? Certainly not. As repeated throughout this work, the *unrepentant* members are those subject to church discipline. The reality of grace and forgiveness certainly needs to be understood in every church, a community of sinful and forgiven people. No one is perfect and all are sinners needing grace. Every true believer in a congregation is growing by grace, and therefore, has not yet reached perfection. But a vital characteristic of every professing believer is continued repentance (1 John 3:4-10).

But not only should an individual be disciplined for living sinfully, he also should be disciplined for holding false teaching (2 Thes 3:6; Titus 3:10; Rom 16:17 Gal 1:6-7; 5:12; 1Tim 1:19-20; 6:3-5; 2 Tim 2:16-18; Rev 2:14-15, 20; 2 Cor 2:6). “God cares about both our understanding of His truth and our living it out.”<sup>77</sup> But what doctrinal errors require church discipline? Certainly some doctrines are much less essential than others. Scripture does not provide a list of fundamental doctrines that must be held by church members. Consequently, churches must use discernment regarding this issue and determine which doctrines they believe to be essential and necessary for their members to hold.

A church should not discipline over matters of preference and debatable gray areas of personal conviction that are not necessarily sinful. To discipline over these categories is unwarranted by scripture, foolish, controlling, and divisive.

Nothing can properly be considered a reasonable cause of offense or just grounds for discipline, but what is manifestly contrary to the Scriptures. Members may see many things in others which they dislike—personal idiosyncrasies perhaps offensive, but which cannot be justly considered subjects for complaint, or ecclesiastical censure. They are matters for Christian forbearance, to be endured, if they cannot be corrected in some other way.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Hiscox. *Principles and Practices*, 185.

<sup>77</sup> Dever. *Nine Marks*, 177.

<sup>78</sup> Hiscox. *Principles and Practices*, 179.

The only exception to this rule would be in regards to things one may have agreed to by means of a church constitution—but it is highly suggested that a church not put matters of preference or debatable standards as rules for its members to abide by in its constitution.

#### V. Who? The Participants in Church Discipline

Finally, the last issue to address is who is to be involved in Church discipline. That the erring individual be involved is self-evident. Also self-evident would be those confronting the erring member, whether one individual (step 1 in the Matthew 18 process), a few individuals (step 2), or an entire church (step 3 and 4). Therefore, this issue of who is to participate in church discipline seems rather simple at first glance. However, some more difficult questions do exist.

First, what is an adolescent's role in church discipline? As anyone else in the church, they should be instructed about the biblical process of church discipline. For them to confront an adult most likely would be inappropriate and ineffective, but this is not to say they cannot be involved. Certainly no one can deny that children can be witnesses of sin just as easily as anyone else. If a child unfortunately witnesses a sin, he should be instructed to inform an adult while at the same time avoid gossip. Further, children can also learn from the doctrine of church discipline the benefit of keeping friends accountable, which is a major part of church discipline. On the other hand, a much more difficult question is whether it is biblical for an adolescent to be disciplined by the church? This question must be handled case by case with much discernment and much pray. Factors such as whether the church extends membership to non-adults and the age of the offender would be factors. Consulting a church leader would definitely be advisable if such a situation emerged. In many cases, parental discipline should be held as a proper option in substitution for what would for an adult require discipline from the church. If church discipline is decided to be the best option for an adolescent's sin, various factors may likely require a varied approach to the method of discipline presented in this work.

Another issue of concern is whether or not churches should discipline non-members. Without a doubt, churches should not limit who they call to repentance. Certainly church members are called to confront everyone of their sin. This act is inherent in presenting the gospel. However, formal discipline, specifically stages 3 and 4 in the Matthew 18 model, would seem impossible to perform on a non-member. A church cannot expel someone "out" (stage 4) who was never "in" the church. Secondly, a church may run into some legal trouble if it begins publically rebuking individuals who have not covenanted with it through membership. In short, formal *church* discipline can only be administered to church members. It is a privilege of church membership.

Finally, who should participate in the process of discipline? As noted previously, that those confronting the sin be involved is self-evident. But in another sense, the entire church should always be involved in preventative discipline by edifying one another. Further, in the cases of corrective discipline which are brought before the church, all should be involved through at minimum disciplined prayer (1 John 5:16). Finally, in regards to the process of restoration, as noted earlier (III.G.), all must be involved in one sense or another. But when it comes to direct counseling and bearing the burdens of another's sin, "Paul seems to be emphasizing [in Galatians 6:1-2] that not all Christians, but Christians who are spiritually mature, should deal with sin in the lives of others. Not all may be qualified."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 83.

## VI. Excurses: Further Questions Concerning Church Discipline

### A. Does Jesus' command not to judge contradict the idea of church discipline?

If Jesus had actually told the church not to judge and to simply be tolerant of every action and belief, than yes, church discipline would not jive with Christ's supposed teaching. In fact, if Jesus had commanded "do not judge—no exceptions," He would be a hypocrite for He Himself judged (i.e., Mt 23). One might respond that Jesus is an exception to His own command not to judge, seeing that He is God. Yet nonetheless, Jesus would be judging, which would lead one to ask why his followers then would not be permitted to judge according to Jesus' already expressed judgments.

But beyond all of this debating lies the true mistake assumed in the question: that Jesus commanded judging to never be done—no exceptions. This idea is due to a misunderstanding of Matthew 7 where Jesus plainly states, "Judge not" (Mt 7:1). Does this mean judgments are disallowed, no exceptions? Hardly, for in John 7:24 Jesus *commands* people to judge. Therefore, a proper conclusion is that in both of these texts Jesus' focus is not whether the act of judging is inherently moral or immoral. If seen in their contexts, one will note that in both verses Jesus is dealing with what *type* of judging ought to be done and ought not to be done, which presupposes that judging is acceptable and even at times imperative (John 7:24). In Matthew 7 Jesus is condemning *hypocritical* judging. In John 7 Jesus is condemning judgments based on *appearances* and encouraging *right* judgments.

In conclusion, Jesus' words in Matthew 7 were never meant by Christ to refute His very own words in Matthew 18.<sup>80</sup> "Could it be that, in our day, a misunderstanding of Matthew 7:1 has been a shield for sin and has worked to prevent the kind of congregational life that was known by churches of an earlier day and could be known by us again?"<sup>81</sup>

### B. Does Jesus' dealing with the adulterous woman in John 7:53-8:11 contradict the doctrine of church discipline?

First of all, Jesus in no way ignores or excuses her sin. Second, He shows that simply administering punishment is far inferior to promoting restoration and healing—aligning perfectly with the purposes of church discipline presented above. And lastly, by His implicit rebuke of the men seeking to stone this adulterer, Jesus challenges believers not to be hypocritical when practicing church discipline. Therefore, lessons pulled from this passage are not contradictory to the doctrine of church discipline but a well suited compliment.

### C. Is practicing church discipline anti-evangelistic? Won't disciplining members shrink the size of one's church?

Before this question is directly addressed, one should be reminded that the size of one's church should by no means be a superior concern than the concern to obey scriptural commands, namely the command to practice church discipline. But nonetheless, this question is still somewhat beneficial to address, for evangelism should be the concern of believers. So, what might church history reveal about this question?

In pre-Civil War days, 'Southern Baptists excommunicated nearly 2 percent of their membership every year'! Incredible as it may seem, while they were doing that their churches grew! In fact, their churches

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<sup>80</sup> Dever. *Nine Marks*, 170.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 188,

grew at twice the rate of the population growth! So the concern that a move to such biblical church discipline might be ‘anti-evangelistic’ seems unfounded, to say the least.<sup>82</sup>

Why might church discipline actually have been (as seen by this example above) and currently be a great cause *for* evangelism? “Jesus intended our lives to back up words. If our lives don’t back up words, the evangelistic task is injured.”<sup>83</sup>

#### **D. By what authority is the church able practice discipline?**

First, scripture simply assumes that churches have this authority.<sup>84</sup> First, a local church’s authority is assumed in the truth of each individual, local church’s God-given autonomy.<sup>85</sup> Second, the fact that Jesus gave the Church guidelines on how to practice discipline (Mt 18:15-17) and that Paul assumes the Corinthians should have known to discipline their erring member implies and assumes the local church has this authority (2 Thes 3:6; Titus 3:10). Therefore, questioning where this authority comes from is acceptable; but questioning if the church has this authority is unfounded in scripture.

So, if a church’s authority to discipline is assumed in scripture, and if the very nature of church autonomy implies this authority, is the local church’s authority to discipline internally derived? No. On the contrary, this authority has been granted externally from God Himself, as shown by the three verses following Jesus’ instruction on the process of church discipline in Matthew 18:15-17. A key to interpreting these notoriously difficult verses (v. 18-20) is recognizing that they are contextually linked to their preceding verses (v. 15-17), which deal with church discipline. In other words, Jesus has not abandoned the topic of church discipline in verses 18-20.

In verse 18 Jesus states that whatever you (plural—referring directly the disciples and indirectly to the church as notable from the context of verses 15-17) bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and likewise, whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven. First, Jesus’ binding and loosing language first appeared in the controversial passage of Matthew 16 (specifically verse 19), just two chapters back. As seen from Matthew 16:13-20’s context, biding and losing connotes the idea of authority. In other words, Jesus is stating in verse 18 that the church has authority to exercise discipline.

But from where does this authority come or originate? Notice Jesus’ additional words, “shall be having been bound” and “shall be having been loosed in heaven.” Both of these English phrases are composed by a future tense being verb and a perfect tense participle in the Greek text. Consequently, many translations conclude that they should be translated with a past tense, as shown above (i.e., YLT, NASB, HCSB), while other translations prefer to translate these phrases with what would appear to be more of a future tense such as “shall be bound” or “will be loosed” (i.e., ASV, ESV, RSV, NIV, KJV, NKJV). Why is this translation issue important enough to mention? It has theological implications, specifically on how one understands the church’s authority to practice discipline. If the participle should be translated with a past sense of time, than Christ would be saying that the church’s decision in a case of church discipline is based on *previous* binding and loosing in heaven. In other words, “The church’s decision reflects the very will of God in heaven.”<sup>86</sup> If the participle is to be understood with a future sense of

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>84</sup> A summary answer to this question exists in section III.E.

<sup>85</sup> Hiscox. *Principles and Practices*, 169.

<sup>86</sup> Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 75.

action, the verse would be stating that heaven will bind and loose *in response* to what the church decides. J.R. Mantey states that to translate these perfect tense verbs as “shall have been bound” and “shall have been loosed,” makes much more sense.<sup>87</sup> As Leon Morris states,

Jesus is not giving the church the right to make decisions that will then become binding on God. Such a thought is alien from anything in his teaching. He is saying that as the church is responsive to the guidance of God it will come to the decisions that have already been made in heaven.<sup>88</sup>

Even if the perfect tense, seeing Greek tenses are flexible, does not denote a past tense action in this text, theology seems to demand for the former translation containing this past tense time. But whatever the case, all can rightly conclude Jesus’ main point—the church has heaven’s backing in regards to church discipline. Verse 18 is both a challenge, for the church ought to think twice about their decisions knowing that they are representing God in what they do, and an assurance, knowing God’s sovereignty is the authority behind what they do.

Moving on to verse 19, Jesus says, “if two of you agree on earth about anything (or any matter) that they may ask (or pray), it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven.” This verse has frequently been the abuse of misinterpretation. From experience it would appear obvious that Jesus is not promising that any request made by two or more people will be answered positively by God. Such a claim would definitely make God to be something similar to a magic genie and potentially require Him to act contrary to His own character. Craig L. Blomberg summarizes the proper understanding of this text well:

In this context v. 19 simply restates the theme of v. 18. The word for any “thing” (*pragma*) is a term frequently limited to judicial matters. Here Jesus reiterates that actions of Christian discipline, following God’s guidelines, have his endorsement. This remains true even if they come from a very small fellowship, including but not limited to the “two or three” gathered in vv. 15–16.<sup>89</sup>

In summary, “those who prayerfully seek God’s wisdom in exercising discipline may have confidence that the decisions they make reflect the will of God in heaven.”<sup>90</sup>

Finally, in verse 20 Jesus explains why the prayer will be effective, and the reason for the church’s authority in church discipline in general—His special presence. Often one will hear this verse referenced as a proof text for what constitutes a church. But Jesus says nothing of that sort nor does anything in His words indicate He is addressing the nature of a local church. He states, “for,” indicating the reason specifically for why the prayer of verse 19 will be answered, “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” Plain and simple, authority and the effectiveness of pursuing God’s will in a matter of church discipline comes from the special presence of God (Jesus) Himself, even if only during the second stage of discipline (“two of three”). The phrase “in my name” indicates that

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<sup>87</sup> Mantey, J.R. “Distorted Translations in John 20:23; Matthew 16:18-19 and 18:18,” *Review and Expositor* 78 (Summer 1981), 415.

<sup>88</sup> Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (469). Grand Rapids, Mich.; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

<sup>89</sup> Blomberg, Craig L. *Vol. 22: Matthew (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 281.

<sup>90</sup> Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 75.

under Christ, a local church is both sovereign and independent. It is not claimed, however, that she has the power, to make laws. It is granted and maintained that Christ is the only law giver, and that all that is left for the church to do, in the cases of offenses, is to administer and execute the law. It has no legislative power; but Christ as invested it with *judicial and executive powers*.<sup>91</sup>

### **E. Does a church need a presbytery, denominational council, etc. to expel an elder?**

The church is autonomous and the *church* (and nothing else) has been given the authority to practice church discipline (V.I.D.), discipline by the *church*. “The church is told how she is to ‘receive an accusation against an elder;’ but it is not hinted to her that she cannot proceed, in other respects, in his trial . . . .”<sup>92</sup> Therefore, the answer is no.

### **F. How does the Lord’s Supper relate to church discipline?**

It seems best to begin by presenting a simple conclusion to this question: being disciplined by one’s church should restrict one’s participation in the Lord’s Super. Often one may hear someone make a claim for this truth on the basis of Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 11:27 that whoever partakes in the Lord’s Super in an unworthy way will be guilty. The context, however, reveals that Paul is addressing the misuse and inappropriate manner in which the Corinthian church was practicing the ordinance. Therefore, a case for the above premise must be made from other scriptural arguments. The following will do just that.

1 Corinthians 11:18-21 and 33 make the implication that the Lord’s Super is an act of unity and fellowship<sup>93</sup>—as self evident in its alternative name, “Communion”—carried out by fellow members of a local church. “The prerequisites for participation in that symbol are continued repentance and belief. It follows, then, that those who do not meet the prerequisites of unity with the church should be excluded from participation in the symbol of that unity.”<sup>94</sup> If one is not to fellowship with a disciplined brother (2 Thes 3:6, 14; Rom 16:17), then one certainly should not participate with a disciplined brother in the Lord’s Super—an ordinance of unity, communion, and association (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). This is why Paul can say in 1 Corinthians 5:11 “not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother . . . not even to *eat* with such a one” (possibly a reference to the Lord’s Table).

Withholding the Lord’s Super is not to be an act of discipline, but the result of being in a state of unrepentance. Being excluded from the Lord’s Super should occur as soon as unrepented sin is known and excluding one from communion can be enforced. This may be stage 3 of the Matthew 18 process (seeing that at this point the church will have been informed of the unrepentance) but potentially earlier stages if the circumstances permit.

### **G. What is the elders’ role in church discipline?**

In order for church discipline to occur, and anyone to have a role in it, people must be informed about church discipline. Although each individual is accountable for his action or lack of action (James 4:17) despite his ignorance (Heb 9:7), scripture clearly states that it is the duty of the elder to teach his congregation (1 Tim 3:2) and that he is responsible for their care (1 Pet 5:2). Therefore, elders ought to inform their congregation about the Biblical instructions of church discipline, particularly their personal responsibilities in preventative discipline as well as

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<sup>91</sup> Mell. “Corrective Church Discipline,” 449.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 457.

<sup>93</sup> Dever, Mark and Paul Alexander. *The Deliberate Church: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel* (Crossway Books: Wheaton, 2005), 107.

<sup>94</sup> Dever, *The Deliberate Church*, 107.

corrective discipline, especially steps 1 and 2 which they would be directly responsible for initiating and carrying out if need be. More often than not, members of the congregation should be the ones initiating church discipline. Consequently, for them to know how to do so is vital. Informing them is the responsibility of the elders, who may not be involved in church discipline until stage 3 in the Matthew 18 process.

Should a case of church discipline arise, elders must maintain absolute neutrality to individuals involved in the discipline<sup>95</sup> while maintaining absolute allegiance to the Bible. In remaining neutral, elders should never be the sole determiner or try to manipulate the congregation in a case of church discipline. The *church* holds the authority and autonomy to carry out its discipline. An elder's preaching ministry during a time of formal church discipline (steps 3 and 4) should involve attempts to keep the church in unity and good conduct. "Politics," for lack of a better word, should be completely absent.

Lastly, elders, as individuals competent in the Word of God, beyond a doubt should be involved in Biblical counseling during church discipline. Such counseling is not limited to counseling the disciplined member if he should repent, but also those members involved in the discipline so that he may impart Biblical wisdom on how to act properly in the situations they may face.

#### **H. How is Biblical counseling related to church discipline?**

In one sense, the proper question is, "How is church discipline *not* related to Biblical counseling?" or to narrow the question down, "What aspect of church discipline might *not* be considered a form of Biblical counseling?" In a sense, the entire process of church discipline is a facet of counseling and discipleship. "Counseling and church discipline are inextricable intertwined; neither can be carried on effectively and biblically without the other."<sup>96</sup> This truth implies that Biblical counseling be defined something similar to advising and instructing by means of Biblical truth and calling for adherence to that truth—certainly a pervading foundation to the doctrine of church discipline. Biblical counseling in relation to church discipline can and should occur both formally and informally. Every stage in the Matthew 18 process is a form of Biblical counseling by means of confronting an individual with scriptural truth and calling him to adhere to it. The elders' responsibility to teach their congregation about the doctrine of church discipline is a form of Biblical counseling, for in doing so they are teaching Biblical truth and calling for its adherence. And lastly, the restoration process must be engulfed in the concept of Biblical counseling and assisting repentant members to adhere to scriptural truth.

#### **I. How does a church avoid getting sued for practicing church discipline?**

Unfortunately, in today's day and age practicing church discipline is not as simple as obeying the scriptural mandate. Due to the possibility, and reality, of lawsuits being brought against a church for practicing church discipline, churches must be aware of various steps they can take to avoid such legal trouble.

First, including a thorough statement regarding the church's beliefs and practice of church discipline in the constitution can help prevent potential lawsuits. When individuals join the church they should be required to sign an agreement to abide under the church's constitution.<sup>97</sup> Statements in the constitution regarding church discipline should at least include

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<sup>95</sup> Mell. "Corrective Church Discipline," 444.

<sup>96</sup> Adams. *Handbook of Church Discipline*, 11.

<sup>97</sup> Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 137.

an agreement by members to submit themselves to the potential discipline of the church should it be necessary (2 Cor 10:6; Heb 13:17), to place themselves subject to discipline even if they attempt to avoid discipline by resigning their membership,<sup>98</sup> and to not pursue legal action against the church or any member in the case of church discipline (1 Cor 6-8).

Secondly, caution should be taken during every aspect of church discipline. For example, if public rebuke is necessary, be careful as to how the information is exposed, making sure to reveal no more information than what is necessary.<sup>99</sup> A church should follow its constitutional policies of church discipline, lest by breaking the constitution it may give one an opportunity to likewise break the constitution and sue.<sup>100</sup>

Thirdly, lawsuits can be avoided by a proper and diligent keeping of records. Records should be kept in relation to all official church discipline (step 3 and 4 specifically).<sup>101</sup> Any important materials involved in the discipline, such as letters, should also be kept.<sup>102</sup>

Finally, in counseling situations, whether related to corrective church discipline or not, do not promise confidentiality without exception. This statement may seem odd, but in the case that an individual who has come in repentance for counseling may turn to unrepentance and/or even quit the counseling, the counselor will need to enact church discipline for the counselee's known unrepentance. In such a case, if the first stage in the Matthew 18 process does not bring the ex-counselee to repentance, the ex-counselor is then required to expose the individual's sin to the witnesses needed in stage 2. However, if the counselor has promised confidentiality, he has placed himself in a dilemma—either break confidentiality or break the command to enact church discipline. Therefore, confidentiality must never be given without exception. “We must not promise absolute confidentiality, but rather, confidentiality that is consistent with biblical requirements.”<sup>103</sup> In formal counseling situations, have a written policy that counselees must sign. This agreement should include a statement that confidentiality will be practiced with the exception of legal obligations and/or church discipline should the counselee become unrepentant. And finally, outside of those exceptions, do keep confidential information given during counseling as confidential.

These methods, and surely many more, can help prevent a church from facing lawsuits due to follow its scriptural mandate to discipline. But when all is said and done, if obeying God's Word would result in being sued, obeying God's Word is worth it.

## **J. What should a church do if one of its members practices church discipline unbiblically?**

Some examples of such situations would include an offended member refusing to confront his offender in the first stage of the Matthew 18 process, or, after following through with that first stage, refusing to proceed to the second stage if the offender refuses to repent. Simply stated, this individual is sinning by withholding the grace found in church discipline from another member. Therefore, he is liable to church discipline and should be confronted by another member (the first stage in the Matthew 18 process).

A more difficult question is, what if a confronting member unbiblically bypasses a stage or stages in the disciplinary process of Matthew 18? Obviously this confronting member has

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 136-137.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>101</sup> Adams. *Handbook of Church Discipline*, 86.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 32.

sinned by not following the scriptural guidelines of church discipline, whether ignorantly or deliberately, and is liable to church discipline and should be confronted. If the sin was committed in ignorance, the confrontation should include teaching the individual about the proper method of church discipline. But in either case, if the individual does not repent, he is liable to further church discipline (step 2, etc.). However, if he repents, as in any other case, he should make reconciliation to any hurt parties.

The unfortunate result of such a sin (bypassing a stage in the discipline process) exposes the sin of another member beyond the level it should have been exposed in the discipline process. Consequently, that original member's sin must be dealt with at the level it has now been made known. For example, if the sin is exposed to the church, the church is now involved and therefore discipline must proceed at stage 3 in the Matthew 18 process. But say if the sin is exposed solely to the elders, than it should not yet be exposed to the church, etc. Such scenarios require wisdom, discernment, and prayer.

#### **K. What if someone refuses to be tried or wants to withdraw from the church prior to being withdrawn from by the church?**

First and foremost, this act of defiance matters; it is significant. "The sovereignty of a church is subverted, when her members successfully rebel against her authority; as when a member under charges refuses to be tried, and successfully tears himself free from her jurisdiction."<sup>104</sup> This act of members simply leaving a church or transferring to a new church when faced with church discipline is considered by some to be the greatest difficulty to a church's ability to successfully practice discipline.<sup>105</sup>

"A church-member in disorder may say he refuses to be tried; but if the church be true to Christ, to herself, and to the culprit, he will be tried notwithstanding."<sup>106</sup> Certainly including a statement in one's church constitution disallowing such action would be advisable in order to prevent potential legal troubles involved in such a circumstance (IV.I.). But whatever the case, the sin of a member must not be dismissed simply because he attempts to escape discipline. If a church must carry out his discipline in his absence, so be it. A notification should then be sent to the expelled individual that he was expelled and that they lovingly desire his return upon repentance.

#### **L. What should be done if an excommunicated individual continues to attend church services?**

If this question implies whether or not an expelled member should be allowed to continue attending church services, the answer is "absolutely yes!" What could be better for this expelled member than to hear the Word of God, that it might rebuke him better than any church member ever can? "Since he is to be treated as a heathen, and since heathen are permitted to attend the services of the church (1 Corinthians 14:23-25) . . . he should be allowed to hear the preaching of the word."<sup>107</sup> So, what should be done if he *hopefully* attends church services? He should be treated as an unsaved individual, as his discipline demands, which should involve presenting him with the gospel, rebuking him, and pleading with him to repent.

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<sup>104</sup> Mell. "Corrective Church Discipline," 449.

<sup>105</sup> Laney. *A Guide to Church Discipline*, 149.

<sup>106</sup> Mell. "Corrective Church Discipline," 449.

<sup>107</sup> Adams. *Handbook of Church Discipline*, 83.

The only danger in allowing an expelled member to continue attending church services is that it might be unclear to the outside community that this individual has been expelled. Every instance will present its own unique dilemmas which will require prayer and wisdom.